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IT IS QUICKER TO TELEPHONE

A Comedy in One Act

BY
IAN HAY

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MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
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MADE IN ENGLAND

CHARACTERS

MR. BLOXHAM.

GLADYS.

MR. RAPKIN.

MRS. RAPKIN.

SCENE.—The Rapkins' villa at Golder's Green.

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IT IS QUICKER TO TELEPHONE

SCENE.—*The Parlour of MR. RAPKIN's house at Golder's Green.*

There is a window at back. Door up R., and another L. Fireplace in R. wall with a settee just above and slightly diagonal with it. A table C. with two chairs; telephone on the table, at L. end. This is the essential furniture, but one or two additions would make the room more attractive.

(See Ground Plan of Scene.)

When the CURTAIN rises, GLADYS, the maid, is ushering in MR. BLOXHAM L. He is a bluff, red-faced, genial man.

BLOXHAM. Tell Mr. Rapkin I'm here, will you, Gladys?

GLADYS (*who is a friendly young person*). Righto, Mr. Bloxham! Is he expecting you?

BLOXHAM. Expecting me? He invited me. Rang me up not ten minutes ago, and begged me to pop over double quick. Has the boiler burst, or something?

GLADYS. No, but the missis has come home.

BLOXHAM. Come home?

GLADYS. Yes—a week before her time. Rotten luck, isn't it, for all of us?

BLOXHAM. When did she blow in?

GLADYS. Twenty minutes ago. A nice little surprise packet, I can tell you. Dinner just cleared away, and everything washed up. Now we've all got to get to work and boil an egg for her.

BLOXHAM. Where's Mr. Rapkin?

GLADYS. Upstairs, unstrapping her boxes. No, here he is.

(Enter MR. RAPKIN R. *He is a rather dismal person, with a drooping moustache. He seems to be in a perpetual state of nervous apprehension. He wears a tail-coat and turned-down collar.*)

RAPKIN. My dear friend, thank you for coming round. Gladys, bring the sherry, that's a good girl.

GLADYS. Righto, Mr. Rapkin!

(*She exits R.*)

BLOXHAM. Well, what's the matter?

RAPKIN. Bloxham, I simply can't tell you.

BLOXHAM. Then I'll be off home.

RAPKIN. No, no, I didn't mean that. Sit down, and listen. You must drink a glass of sherry. So must I.

BLOXHAM (*sitting L. of the table*). Well, get on with it.

RAPKIN. You know Mr. Mingle? (*He sits above the table.*)

BLOXHAM. Your boss?

RAPKIN (*with feeble dignity*). My principal.

BLOXHAM. All right, your principal. They say he's the toughest nut in the 'ole 'olesale 'osierey business. Well?

RAPKIN. To-day, much to my surprise, he invited me to lunch with him.

BLOXHAM. You? Lunch? A.B.C. or Lyons?

RAPKIN. At the Ritz-Carlton Hotel—and Restaurant.

BLOXHAM. Holy mackerel! Why?

RAPKIN. To meet a lady—a young lady.

BLOXHAM. He must have gone potty. When I take a young lady out to lunch I don't ask anybody else to come.

RAPKIN. I can explain that. Mr. Mingle was expecting a second lady; and he invited me to make a fourth, so to speak.

BLOXHAM. H'm! I wonder which of the young ladies it was that didn't turn up—the one he wanted or the one he didn't.

RAPKIN. Perhaps he desired to entertain them both.

BLOXHAM. No blooming fear. If he'd wanted them both he'd have asked them separately. No, my lad, what you were wanted for was to talk to the lemon while he entertained the peach.

RAPKIN. I fail to understand you.

BLOXHAM. You were there to do gooseberry.

RAPKIN. Please stop talking like a greengrocer! And why do you make these insinuations against Mr. Mingle?

BLOXHAM. I'm a bachelor. You act as if you never had been.

RAPKIN (*mournfully*). It's twenty-one years since I was.

(GLADYS enters R. with decanter and glasses.)

GLADYS. Now who wants a drop of sherry?

RAPKIN. Put it down, Gladys.

GLADYS (*putting the sherry and glasses on the table by RAPKIN*). The reason she's come home to-night is to get ready for her mother.

RAPKIN } (*together*). Her mother?
BLOXHAM }

GLADYS. Yes. Her mother's coming here for the week-end. Well, it never rains but it pours! Do you know——

RAPKIN. That'll do, Gladys.

GLADYS. Righto!

(*She exits R.*)

BLOXHAM. Did Mingle talk to the young lady much?

RAPKIN (*pouring out two glasses of sherry*). No; he left the task of entertaining her almost entirely to me.

BLOXHAM. Then evidently it was the peach that didn't turn up. What was the other one like?

RAPKIN. Most attractive.

BLOXHAM. Ah! How old?

RAPKIN. Twenty-three, I should say. Possibly less.

BLOXHAM. What was her name?

RAPKIN. Vivi Valentine. (*He gives BLOXHAM his sherry.*)

BLOXHAM. What did you find to talk to her about?

RAPKIN. Book-keeping, both single and double entry; ledger work, and accounts generally.

BLOXHAM. Oh, my Gawd!

RAPKIN. Miss Valentine started it. She appeared most interested in such matters.

BLOXHAM. What else did you discuss? The water-rate?

RAPKIN (*rising*). No. Of course we touched upon lighter topics too. Indeed, after Mr. Mingle left us—— (*He walks about, distinctly agitated.*)

BLOXHAM. Oh, he left you?

RAPKIN. Yes.

BLOXHAM. I don't blame him. Well?

RAPKIN (*with a feeble simper*). After he left us, we indulged in a little banter and chaff.

BLOXHAM. Rapkin, do you mean to sit there and tell me that you've been trying to start a flirtation with somebody? I mean, have you any idea what you look like? Or did she try to flirt with you?

RAPKIN (*modestly*). Well—she did mention that I had wicked eyes.

BLOXHAM (*rising in his seat, in a strangled voice*). A-a-ah! (*He sits down again.*)

RAPKIN. After that, we discussed literature, music, and—er—the drama. One thing led to another; and ultimately I invited her to take lunch with me to-morrow, and visit a cinema afterwards.

BLOXHAM. Well, I didn't think you had it in you, Rapkin. Lunch where?

RAPKIN. At the Regent Palace Hotel.

BLOXHAM. Have you ever been there in your life?

RAPKIN. No. But I happened to be discussing the whole question of smart restaurants only the other day, with Nash——

BLOXHAM. Nash?

RAPKIN. Our chief cashier. He is quite a society

sort of person. He ties his own evening ties, and sometimes goes to race meetings.

BLOXHAM. And gives parties at the Regent Palace Hotel?

RAPKIN. And other fashionable resorts. He gave me quite a list. But I gathered from him that at the Regent Palace gratuities are not expected, or indeed accepted. That's why I suggested it to——

BLOXHAM. But you! You—asking a girl you hardly know out to lunch! You! What made you do it?

RAPKIN. Possibly some repressed Bohemian strain in my nature. You never know.

(BLOXHAM makes another strangled noise.)

BLOXHAM. Did you drink champagne at lunch?

RAPKIN. No. A little white wine of some kind—a very little.

BLOXHAM. And after Mingle left?

RAPKIN. A liqueur.

BLOXHAM. What did you order?

RAPKIN. Benedictine. It was the only one on the list I knew how to pronounce.

BLOXHAM. And the lady?

RAPKIN. She only drank water.

BLOXHAM (*rising*). And she's coming to lunch with you to-morrow?

RAPKIN (*with a sudden return of his agitation*). No—she's not! She can't! She mustn't! Don't you see? My wife has come home before her time. I'll have to lunch with *her* to-morrow, and take her for a walk afterwards. Bloxham——

BLOXHAM. If you think I'm going to take your wife for a walk——

RAPKIN. No, no, Bloxham! I want your advice. What am I to do?

BLOXHAM. Do? Send your lady friend a message to say the party is off.

RAPKIN (*frantically*). That's just what I can't do! I don't know where she lives! I don't even know her telephone number!

BLOXHAM. That's bad. Well, you must just give her a miss, that's all, and apologize like a little gentleman next time you meet her. (*Suddenly.*) I'll tell you what, old man. I've always liked you. I'll go and give her lunch at the Regent Palace. You can pay for it, of course——

RAPKIN. No, no, no; it's no good, Bloxham! Things are worse than you think. There's something I haven't told you yet. She's going to ring me up here to-night, at nine o'clock—in this very room—with my wife sitting at the other side of that table, within two yards of the telephone! O-o-oh!

BLOXHAM. Why is she going to ring you up?

RAPKIN. Just to have a chat, she said. A chat! And it's a quarter to nine now!

(BLOXHAM *laughs*.)

Bloxham, don't laugh! I shall never hear the last of this. My wife'll hold it over me for years. She'll pretend to believe it's what I do every time she goes away. You know what women are! (*Going to BLOXHAM and putting his hand on his shoulder.*) Bloxham, Bloxham, you're a man of the world.

BLOXHAM (*much flattered*). Well, hardly that.

RAPKIN. Yes, you are.

BLOXHAM. Well, perhaps you're right. What do you want me to do?

RAPKIN. Think of something, I implore you. Give me a hint, a suggestion.

BLOXHAM. Don't get the wind up, old feller. Let me think.

RAPKIN. Yes, yes.

BLOXHAM (*making up his mind*). It's quite simple. When the telephone rings, look up from your evening paper, and stretch yourself—like this—and say, in a lazy sort of way: "That's Mr. Bloxham again." Or, "Dear old Bloxham," if you like.

RAPKIN (*eagerly*). Dear old Bloxham. Yes, yes?

BLOXHAM. Then go to the telephone, take off the receiver and have a conversation with me. There you are!

RAPKIN (*frantically*). But how will that enable me to inform Miss Valentine—

BLOXHAM. Use your brains, my boy. You only pretend to be talking to me.

RAPKIN. But what am I to say?

BLOXHAM. Rapkin, haven't you got anything inside your head but your false teeth? (*He takes up the telephone.*) Now, watch me. (*He keeps the receiver-rest down.*) "Yes, this is Mr. Rapkin. Is that you, Bloxham?" Of course you needn't emphasize the Bloxham. Then listen a bit. Then: "On second thoughts, old friend"—that's good!—"I find I have a long-standing engagement to-morrow afternoon; so I'm afraid I can't manage it after all. Another time perhaps. So sorry. So long! Toodle-oo!" (*Putting the telephone down again.*) Then hang up quick, and say to your wife: "That was dear old Bloxham. What a kind feller he is. He wants me to go for a long country ramble with him to-morrow afternoon; but, of course, with you home again, I refused." There you are! Just bluff it out. Now I must hop it.

RAPKIN. But supposing Miss Valentine says she isn't Bloxham? Supposing she won't let me ring off?

BLOXHAM. Shout her down—like this! (*Going to the telephone and pretending to speak into it.*) It's no good pressing me, because I can't do it! Ring me up at the office on Monday, and we'll make another appointment. (*Turning to RAPKIN.*) And so on, and so on! All you want is a bit of nerve. Now I'm off, before your wife shows up. Good night. Don't thank me. Keep on talking! Bluff it out! And if you get into a really tight corner, say to yourself: "What would Bloxham do?" (*He slaps RAPKIN violently on the back.*) Good night, Wicked Eyes!

(*He goes out L., roaring with laughter.*)

(RAPKIN goes to the door R. and looks out. Then he comes back, and after gazing at the telephone takes it up and suddenly speaks into it.)

RAPKIN. Is that you, Bloxham, old man? Now I

come to think of it, I have a long-standing engagement to-morrow afternoon. I'm sorry. (*Listening.*) Hallo, what's that? No, I don't want any number this evening, thank you: it was an accident. Good night! (*He puts the telephone down hastily.*)

MRS. RAPKIN (*off R.*). Gladys, is my egg ready?

GLADYS (*off R.*). Coming up, mum.

RAPKIN (*nervously*). A-a-ah! (*He picks up the evening paper from the table, and sits in the chair above table.*)

(MRS. RAPKIN *enters R., speaking off to GLADYS. She is a large, slow-moving woman, with a deliberate manner.*)

MRS. RAPKIN. I will have it in here.

RAPKIN. Is that you, dear?

MRS. RAPKIN. Whom else were you expecting, James?

(RAPKIN *giggles nervously. Enter GLADYS with the tray.*)

On the table, Gladys.

GLADYS. Yes, mum. (*She puts it down at L. end of table.*)

MRS. RAPKIN (*suddenly*). Mind Mr. Rapkin's telephone!

(RAPKIN *jumps.*)

GLADYS. I'm a watching of it, mum.

MRS. RAPKIN. Not that it would bother me to see the thing smashed to atoms. I never use it; neither do you, James, so far as I can see.

(GLADYS *goes out.*)

Nobody ever rings us up, and nobody ever will.

RAPKIN. No, dear, I hope not—I mean, I hope so. Quite!

MRS. RAPKIN. We should have been much better suited with a nice wireless outfit. Sophie Sackett has got a five-valve set—whatever that may be. We were listening to it only last night. What are you trying to do, James?

RAPKIN (*who has taken up the tray*). Wouldn't it be

better to have the tray nearer the fire, dear—on a chair, like this? More cosy, don't you think?

MRS. RAPKIN. Thank you, James; I will have it on the table.

RAPKIN. Very good, Martha. *(He replaces the tray.)*

MRS. RAPKIN *(sitting down and pouring out tea)*. Well, I must say, Mother gave me very short notice. I got her wire at lunch time to-day, so I just had to pack up and leave Sophie Sackett's right away. Sophie was terribly disappointed, of course.

RAPKIN. Yes, dear; she would be.

MRS. RAPKIN. Mother will be here first thing to-morrow morning. This egg isn't boiled enough, as usual. Cook gets more undependable every day. You'd better take her a walk round Hampstead Heath after lunch, James.

RAPKIN. Cook, dear?

MRS. RAPKIN. No—Mother. Don't be silly, James. And this tea's as weak as water. But I suppose with me away, the servants have been doing anything they like. If it's wet, you can take her to the pictures.

(All this while RAPKIN is gazing at her apprehensively, with an occasional glance at the clock on the mantelpiece.)

James, what are you looking so queer about? I suppose I can have my own mother to stay in my own home for a day or two? Of course, if you grudge the food she eats, or the bed she sleeps in—

RAPKIN. My dear, I am always delighted to entertain your dear mother, any time she cares to ring up—drop in! *(He begins to walk about restlessly.)*

MRS. RAPKIN. Then don't look as if you'd swallowed the cruet-stand. And don't prowl round the room, James, like a stray cat.

RAPKIN *(meekly)*. No, dear. *(He sits again.)* I think it must be a touch of indigestion. I've had a good deal to worry me lately—in the City.

MRS. RAPKIN. You certainly don't seem yourself: your mind's wandering. You're reading the paper upside down. You've been sitting up late, and smoking, I

expect. (*Suddenly.*) Have you seen much of that Mr. Bloxham lately?

RAPKIN. Just a little: not too much.

MRS. RAPKIN. A very little of Mr. Bloxham is too much.

RAPKIN. And how is Mrs. Sackett, dear?

MRS. RAPKIN (*pouring out a fresh cup of tea; with relish*). I think—I say I think—she's having trouble with her husband again. Of course, she didn't admit it to me in so many words; but when he slipped out after dinner three evenings running, and didn't come back until a quarter to eleven—well, having eyes in my head and my wits about me—

(*The telephone bell rings. RAPKIN jumps, and glances frantically at the clock.*)

I wonder who that can be? Thank goodness someone uses the precious thing.

RAPKIN (*rising, and clearing his throat*). Perhaps it's dear old Bloxham again.

MRS. RAPKIN. Again? Has he been ringing you up while I've been away?

RAPKIN (*eagerly*). Yes. He's a perfect nuisance. (*With forced jollity.*) I—I threatened him last night that if he bothered me again I'd jolly well leave the receiver off the hook. It would be rather a joke to do it, dear—eh?

MRS. RAPKIN. Certainly not. Answer. If you will have the telephone in the house, you must take the consequences.

(*The bell rings again. RAPKIN takes the telephone, moves to the far end of the table from his wife, then sits with his back to her.*)

RAPKIN (*in a low voice*). Hallo? No, this isn't Golder's Green seven-six-five-four.

MRS. RAPKIN. Yes, it is, James.

RAPKIN. Yes, it is. (*He listens, trembling.*) All right!

MRS. RAPKIN. What's the matter?

RAPKIN. Mayfair wants me.

MRS. RAPKIN. And whom do you know in Mayfair ?

RAPKIN (*earnestly*). Nobody, I hope—I believe. I expect it's a wrong number. I'd better hang up.

MRS. RAPKIN (*suddenly*). James !

RAPKIN (*jumping*). Yes, dear.

MRS. RAPKIN. You've got your foot in the waste-paper basket. I don't know what's the matter with you to-night.

RAPKIN (*rising and hastily removing his foot*). I've had a lot to bother me while you've been away, dear.

MRS. RAPKIN. In the City ?

RAPKIN. Yes, in the City. Just one of those little things, you know ! (*Into the telephone.*) Hallo ! Call not come through ? Oh, that's quite all right. Don't trouble to ring again : it's getting late, anyhow. (*He hangs up the telephone, much relieved, and sinks into his chair.*)

MRS. RAPKIN. And what is the little thing that's troubling you in the City ?

RAPKIN. Well, dear, it's a rather delicate matter—(*he lights his pipe with a trembling hand*) delicate, and technical, and confidential—

MRS. RAPKIN (*with ominous calm*). Then don't tell me anything about it. A man should never tell business secrets to his wife—even though she's been a faithful wife to him for twenty years. I know I have always shown myself to be a thoroughly untrustworthy woman ; so, of course—

(RAPKIN gives a deep groan. The telephone, now at R. end of table, rings again. He rises to his feet.)

RAPKIN. Another wrong number, I suppose. (*He takes up the telephone and sits down again. A high-pitched feminine voice is faintly heard. RAPKIN hastily pushes down the receiver-rest with his thumb.*) Is that you, Bloxham, old man ? How are you ? Splendid ! Capital ! What's that ? I can't quite hear you. (*Over his shoulder.*) Very indistinct, this instrument ! (*He listens again.*) Well, that is good of you—uncommonly

good of you—but I'm afraid I must decline. I have a long-standing engagement—I mean, I'm going for a walk with the—and my time to-morrow will be fully occupied, I fear—I hope—I expect! (*The bell rings again. He is compelled to take his thumb from the receiver-rest. The bell stops.*) Oh, yes. Quite so, my dear—man! Oh, the silly old things cut us off, did they? (*Coughing violently.*) I mean—yes—no! Ring up at the office to-morrow morning, please, and we'll talk things over. (*Fairly shouting.*) Good night! (*He hangs up the receiver and rises.*) The telephone service is a disgrace. I was cut off right in the middle of a conversation just now.

MRS. RAPKIN (*calmly*). Was that when the bell began to ring again?

RAPKIN. Yes.

MRS. RAPKIN. I didn't know it could ring while the receiver was off the hook.

RAPKIN (*by a sudden inspiration*). It can, when the wires are crossed.

MRS. RAPKIN. I see. And who was it?

RAPKIN. Bloxham.

MRS. RAPKIN. Bloxham?

RAPKIN. Yes. He wants me to go to a cine—to a billiard match with him to-morrow afternoon. At least, I think so; but there was such a buzzing on the wire I couldn't hear at all.

MRS. RAPKIN. That's funny. The other person's voice sounded quite distinct.

RAPKIN. What other person?

MRS. RAPKIN. The lady.

RAPKIN (*with a sickly smile*). You mean the girl at the exchange?

MRS. RAPKIN. They have male operators at the exchange after eight o'clock, James. Besides, this one called you a "dear old thing." Of course, it's none of my business; I'm only your wife—

RAPKIN. You're mistaken, dear. You couldn't possibly have heard distinctly from where you were sitting. What she really said was, "What would Blox-

ham——" I mean—she said, "Did you ring?"—not "Dear old thing"! (*He goes up, rather pleased with this.*)

MRS. RAPKIN. And why did you tell her to ring up at the office to-morrow morning?

RAPKIN. That was Bloxham.

MRS. RAPKIN. No, James, it wasn't. There are many things I dislike about Mr. Bloxham, but he doesn't speak falsetto. Perhaps you mean it was someone speaking for Mr. Bloxham. Has he got married, or started a lady secretary, or anything?

RAPKIN (*eagerly*). It's a funny thing, but I believe that's what he must have done.

MRS. RAPKIN. Got married?

RAPKIN. Yes.

MRS. RAPKIN. Well, you ought to know: he was in this house not half an hour ago.

RAPKIN (*with a nervous laugh*). I forgot to ask him, dear. But I think he must have someone with him—a party—guests, you know. Perhaps it was just a practical joke, to make a fool of me. You know what bachelors are?

(MRS. RAPKIN *has risen, and is approaching the telephone.*)

(*Frantically.*) Martha, what are you going to do?

MRS. RAPKIN. I am going to ring up Mr. Bloxham. I will not have you worried just now, especially when you are upset by little things in the City.

RAPKIN. But what are you going to ask him, dearest?

MRS. RAPKIN. I shall ask him whether he rang you up just now. (*She takes up the telephone.*)

RAPKIN (*relieved*). Certainly, dear.

MRS. RAPKIN. If he didn't do it, I shall set to work and find out who did. It may take some time, but I shall find out. What's his number?

(*The telephone bell rings. RAPKIN tries to take the telephone; she waves him away.*)

I will answer, James. (*Listening.*) Well? (*A squeaky voice is heard in the telephone again.*) Yes, this is

Golder's Green seven-six-five-four. This is Mrs. Rapkin speaking.

(RAPKIN *drops limply into the settee. There is silence while MRS. RAPKIN listens.*)

(*Into the telephone.*) Who are you, please? Oh! (*Over her shoulder.*) James!

RAPKIN. Yes, Martha?

MRS. RAPKIN. There is someone speaking from Berkeley Square, for Mr. Mingle. Does he live there?

RAPKIN. Yes, thank heaven, he does! What does she—he—want?

MRS. RAPKIN. You. Don't disturb yourself. I will attend to this. (*Into the telephone.*) Can I take a message for Mr. Rapkin? (*The telephone gives an unmistakable squeak. She lays down the telephone.*) James, this lady says she has a private message for you. (*She sits down in chair L. of table in a very stately manner.*)

(RAPKIN *crosses to the telephone.*)

RAPKIN (*taking the telephone, in a trembling voice*). Ha—hallo! Who? Oh! Miss Valentine? How do you do? (*He bows.*) I had the pleasure of meeting you with Mr. Mingle, I think. (*He listens.*) Yes, I have a wonderful memory, as you say. Did I understand that there was a message for me from Mr. Mingle? (*Eagerly.*) Then will you kindly ask Mr. Mingle to step to the telephone at once? (*Turning to his wife, in a very determined manner.*) I have sent for Mr. Mingle, my dear. (*He sits in chair above table.*)

MRS. RAPKIN (*calmly*). And not before it was time.

RAPKIN (*into the telephone*). Good evening, sir. (*He settles down, and listens to a long story. His face changes from surprise to incredulity, and from incredulity to relief and delight.*) Nash—oh! For a long time? Dear, dear! Think of that now! Pentonville gaol! Bless my soul! This very evening? Smart work, smart work!

MRS. RAPKIN (*with growing curiosity*). James, what is it?

RAPKIN (*taking no notice, quite absorbed by this time*).
Me, sir? Oh, sir! Never, sir! (He rumples his hair in his agitation.) Oh, that was the reason? I quite understand, sir. There's nothing to forgive, sir. Very considerate of you to ring me up and explain.

MRS. RAPKIN. James, what is it?

RAPKIN. *Me, sir? Oh, Mr. Mingle, you honour me!* I can't find words! I will certainly report at nine-fifteen to-morrow morning. Thank you, sir, thank you! Good night! (*He hangs up the receiver in a slightly dazed fashion and stands up.*) I can tell you everything now, Martha.

MRS. RAPKIN. There's only one thing I want you to tell me, James, and that is why you were rung up by a woman just now and pretended that she was a man.

RAPKIN (*roguishly*). Ah! Simple!

MRS. RAPKIN. Who—me or you?

RAPKIN. I mean, dear, the explanation will be quite simple. Simple, and not without interest. Simple interest, in fact! (*He giggles.*)

MRS. RAPKIN. James, I shall strike you in a moment.

RAPKIN. Patience, dear. You have heard me speak of Nash?

MRS. RAPKIN. He's your chief cashier, isn't he?

RAPKIN. He *was* our chief cashier.

MRS. RAPKIN. Was?

RAPKIN. Yes, until about an hour ago. The fact is, it seems that there has been something wrong with the office accounts for some time—a serious leakage. Naturally suspicion fell upon two people—Nash and myself.

MRS. RAPKIN (*indignantly*). You? How dare they?

RAPKIN. After all, the money has to pass through the hands of one of us two. However, to cut a long story short, the firm decided to employ a detective.

MRS. RAPKIN. A detective?

RAPKIN. Yes—a female detective. That's quite the latest thing. That was the female detective ringing me up on the telephone just now. (*All this is said with a certain swagger.*)

MRS. RAPKIN (*calmly*). Then why did you say she was Bloxham?

RAPKIN. There, dear, I found myself in a very difficult position. Negotiations were at a most delicate stage—

MRS. RAPKIN. You don't want me to believe that they negotiated with you about setting a detective on you, do you?

RAPKIN (*confused again*). Now you're getting ahead of me, dear.

MRS. RAPKIN. I mean to.

RAPKIN. Let me explain. Did I mention to you that I had had a pleasant little luncheon party with Mr. Mingle—not long ago?

MRS. RAPKIN. You did not.

RAPKIN. Well, I did. And there I met this lady detective. Of course, I didn't know she was a lady detective—

MRS. RAPKIN. Why not call her Vivi, and have done with it?

RAPKIN (*blankly*). Vivi?

MRS. RAPKIN (*indicating the telephone*). You can hear that thing all over the room. Go on.

RAPKIN. Well, I suppose Miss Vivi Valentine sized me up at lunch and decided that I was not a criminal.

MRS. RAPKIN (*sarcastically*). She must be a marvel!

RAPKIN. So she concentrated on Nash. She took him out to dinner last night. After dinner they went on to one of those dancing places—

MRS. RAPKIN (*suddenly*). Is she young, then?

RAPKIN (*considering*). Not more than forty, I should say.

MRS. RAPKIN. Oh! Go on.

RAPKIN. And they did not part company until nearly one o'clock in the morning. I fancy she must have wormed something out of Nash—

MRS. RAPKIN. Never mind Nash! What about you?

RAPKIN (*pained*). Me, dear?

MRS. RAPKIN. Yes. When did she take you out? Don't say you went dancing, with your cartilage?

RAPKIN. My dear Martha, is it likely? Would a man in my position be so indiscreet? Of course, when one was a young fellow about town, one might—

MRS. RAPKIN. Don't talk nonsense! Did you or did you not take that young woman out anywhere?

RAPKIN. I most certainly did not. And I must say, Martha, I am just a little pained that you should—h'm—h'm—even entertain such a possibility!

MRS. RAPKIN. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. When did they catch Nash?

RAPKIN. This evening. He had let drop a clue, which Miss Valentine followed up. Nash is now under lock and key; and Mr. Mingle rang me up from Berkeley Square, to tell me I had been unjustly suspected, and to offer a suitable apology. (*With great dignity.*) I—er—accepted it.

MRS. RAPKIN. And what was Miss Valentine saying to you?

RAPKIN. She was apologizing too!

MRS. RAPKIN (*rising*). James, I am going to bed.

RAPKIN. I may add that I have been appointed chief cashier in Nash's place.

MRS. RAPKIN. You have?

RAPKIN. Yes. It means another two hundred a year. What do you think of that, dear!

MRS. RAPKIN. I think we might get that five-valve wireless set.

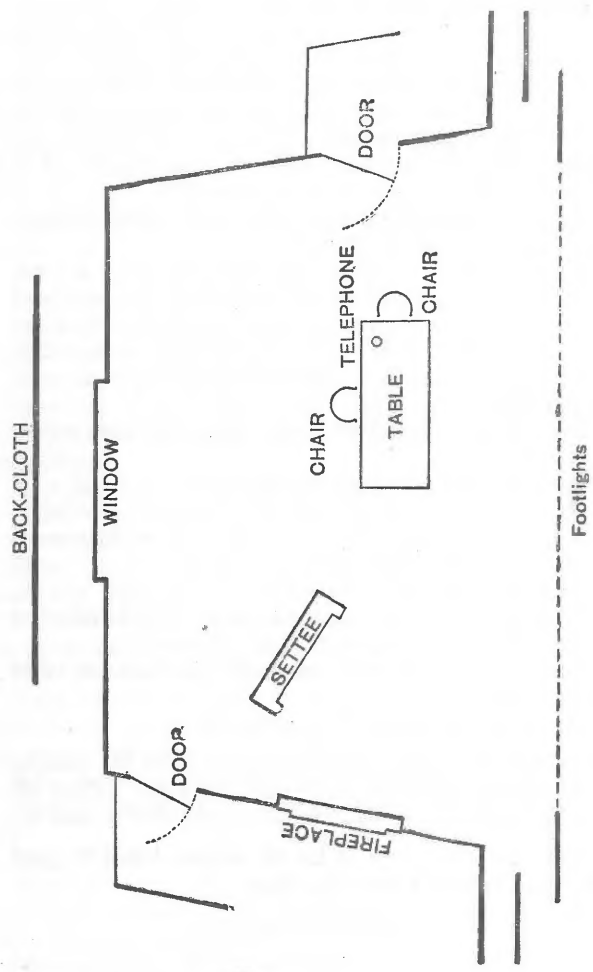
RAPKIN. Certainly, dear, certainly.

(*MRS. RAPKIN goes to the mantelpiece, takes her scissors, then comes back and cuts the telephone flex. Then she picks up the telephone and walks to the door R. with it.*)

MRS. RAPKIN. And in future, James, I will be your Valentine! Don't be long, dear.

(*She goes out.*)

CURTAIN.



3 Bk Dept (58)
1 1/2 cups
O/H Hsc